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RESILIENCY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Abstract

The aim of the study was to replicate the activities necessary to verify the libertial-value-grounded theory of the meaning of life and to examine the question of the existential determinants of resiliency. The libertial-value-grounded theory propounds that the meaning of life is conditioned by the sense of personal freedom and individual sensitivity to values. The above three categories, namely the meaning of life, subjective freedom and axiological sensitivity, are treated as the hypothetical existential determinants of resiliency. The study was carried out on 42 women and 51 men, aged 22 to 79 years, by means of the following methods: the Ostrowski Attitude to Life Questionnaire, Ostrowski Personal Freedom Questionnaire, Ostrowski Sensitivity to Values Questionnaire and Ogińska-Bulik and Juczyński SPP-25 Resiliency Measurement Scale, the authors of which adhere to the understanding of resiliency as a disposition. The libertial-value-grounded theory of the meaning of life was positively verified, which demonstrated that the meaning of life is conditioned by subjective freedom and axiological sensitivity, in the path model which satisfactorily fits the empirical data (*chi-squared* (18) = 13.90; $p = 0.74$; RMR = 1.456; GFI = 0.93; AGFI = 0.86; RMSEA < 0.01). 46% of the meaning of life variance was explained. The hypothesis which claimed that resiliency is conditioned by the existential predictors examined in the study, the meaning of life and subjective freedom in particular, was verified, and relevant correlations were presented in the path model which satisfactorily fits the data (*chi-squared* (54) = 48.62; $p = 0.71$; RMR = 1.63; GFI = 0.86; AGFI = 0.76; RMSEA < 0.01). The resiliency component variance was explained by Persistence (18%), Coping Skills (60%), Openness (67%), Focus in Difficult Situations (67%) and Tolerance of Failure (81%). Further research is required to explore the sequentiality of the meaning-of-life predictors, the correlation between resiliency and sensitivity to values and the resiliency component variation according to gender.

Key words: resiliency, meaning of life, subjective freedom, sensitivity to values, motivation theory

Odporność psychiczna a poczucie sensu życia

Streszczenie

Celem badań jest replikacja badań, które miały na celu weryfikację libertalno-walorycznej teorii sensu życia oraz odpowiedź na pytanie o egzystencjalne uwarunkowania odporności psychicznej. Zgodnie z teorią libertalno-waloryczną, sens życia jest zależny od poczucia wolności osobowej oraz wrażliwości wobec wartości. Trzy powyższe kategorie: sens życia, wolność podmiotowa i wrażliwość aksjologiczna stanowią hipotetyczne egzystencjalne uwarunkowania odporności. Badania przeprowadzono w grupie 42 kobiet i 51 mężczyzn, w wieku od 22 do 79 lat, za pomocą następujących metod: Kwestionariusza Stosunku do Życia T.M. Ostrowskiego, Kwestionariusza Poczucia Wolności T.M. Ostrowskiego, Kwestionariusza Wartości T.M. Ostrowskiego oraz Skali Pomiaru Prężności SPP-25 N. Ogińskiej-Bulik i Z. Juczyńskiego, której autorzy przyjęli rozumienie odporności psychicznej jako dyspozycji (*resiliency*). Zweryfikowano pozytywnie libertalno-waloryczną teorię sensu życia, wykazując uwarunkowanie sensu życia przez wolność podmiotową i wrażliwość aksjologiczną w modelu ścieżek o satysfakcjonujących wskaźnikach dopasowania do danych empirycznych ($\chi^2(18) = 13,90$; $p = 0,74$; RMR = 1,456; GFI = 0,93; AGFI = 0,86; RMSEA < 0,01). Wariancję sensu życia wyjaśniono w 46%. Potwierdzono hipotezę o uwarunkowaniu odporności psychicznej przez badane predyktory egzystencjalne, a zwłaszcza sens życia i wolność podmiotową, przedstawiając zależności w modelu ścieżek, dobrze dopasowanym do danych ($\chi^2(54) = 48,62$; $p = 0,71$; RMR = 1,63; GFI = 0,86; AGFI = 0,76; RMSEA < 0,01). Wariancję komponentów odporności psychicznej wyjaśniono w zakresie od: 18% Wytrwałość, poprzez 60% Kompetencje w zakresie radzenia sobie, 67% Otwartość, 67% Mobilizacja w trudnej sytuacji, do 81% Tolerancja na porażkę. Dalszych badań wymagają takie zagadnienia, jak: sekwencyjność predyktorów sensu życia, zależność pomiędzy odpornością psychiczną a wrażliwością wobec wartości oraz zróżnicowanie komponentów odporności, zależnie od płci badanych.

Słowa kluczowe: odporność psychiczna, sens życia, wolność podmiotowa, wrażliwość wobec wartości, teoria motywacji

The question of the meaning of life is an inherent part of the studies on resiliency. Frankl (1984/1950) defined the meaning of life as a mechanism which protects the individual against mental disorders, noogenic neurosis and depression in particular. It can be currently observed that considerable interest is shown in the concept of the meaning of life and in a variety of contexts too, especially philosophical and psychological ones, which is best reflected by a series of wide-ranging books (Baumeister, 1991; Cottingham, 2003; Himmelmann, 2013; Lurie, 2006; Seachris, 2013; Wolf, 2010) and numerous articles on the subject. Likewise, the theory of resiliency and relevant research in the field are now in the ascendancy. This chapter thus brings together two areas, namely the meaning of life and resiliency, which are both widely pursued these days and examined here in the light of both theoretical reflection and empirical studies.

One of the trends resulting from the overlapping of these two areas is a line of research which proves significant to this particular chapter and which treats the meaning of life as a resiliency-fostering mechanism. This particular line of research can be divided into several categories.

One of these categories is the traditional trend in research on the meaning of life, which is probably best represented in literature and concerns the risk of suicide. A contemporary case in point is the study by Kleiman and Beaver (2013), who demonstrated that the meaning of life fosters resiliency, which in turn leads to a drop in suicidal thoughts and reduces the risk of suicide. Another study from this particular area (Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan & Riskind, 2013) showed that the experience of gratitude and determination as personal dispositions reduce the incidence of suicidal thoughts, which nonetheless takes place by virtue of the meaning of life. The authors claim that this allows for resiliency stimulation, since the experience of gratitude and determination can be modified, which in turn sets them apart from the meaning of life.

A group of studies on the psychological and existential foundations of resiliency are also worthy of attention (Ostrowski, 2014). They were conducted using qualitative, self-assessment and experimental procedures. One of the many examples in this respect are studies which adhere to the narrative approach and the TAT projection method and have been conducted in India to reveal the determinants of the meaning of life in women who recovered from cervical cancer (Saraf, Singh, Khurana, 2013). The authors demonstrated that hope and the meaning of life reinforce resiliency, the process of which is mediated by religious faith, an increase in piety and social support. The same trend also encompasses American qualitative studies on women over 80 years of age who are similar to their Indian counterparts in that they derive their resiliency from religious faith, the ability to keep track of their goals and to feel gratitude (Manning, 2014).

One of the examples of how the self-assessment procedure may be applied in research is the study on women who have just received a positive gynaecological cancer diagnosis. The authors identified higher resiliency levels in women who showed more positive emotions, could process their experiences in a positive way and were aware of the importance of the peace and quiet and the meaning of life (Manne et al., 2014).

The publications which address the direct correlation between the meaning of life and resiliency appear to be the lowest in number. One of such publications describes a study carried out in Hong Kong which applied the test-retest method to examine the impact of the participation in a course called *The Caring Angel*, which was organised for caregivers to adults with intellectual disabilities on their meaning of life and resiliency levels. The study group consisted of the parents of adults with intellectual disabilities and the volunteers from the area. It was demonstrated that the participation in the programme fosters the meaning of life and strengthens the following resiliency parameters: social resources and social competences (Wong Phyllis, Fong, Lam, 2015).

The majority of the studies presented above were carried out with qualitative or self-assessment methods whereas experimental studies were rarely conducted in this particular research area. One of the examples of the experimental approach is a study on the MIDUS Programme sample, which deals not so much with the

meaning of life as with its purpose, which is in line with the theory propounded by C.D. Ryff, who argues that a purpose in life is one of the determinants of health and well-being (Ryff, Singer, 2008). The authors of the study demonstrate that a feeling of greater sense of purpose in the respondents translates into their higher resiliency levels, which is best expressed by their ability to regain their mental equilibrium after they have been exposed to visually stimulation as part of the experiment. Their excitation levels were measured with *the Eye Blink Rate* EBR (Schaefer et al., 2013).

My own research, which is presented in this chapter, attempts to examine the direct relationship between the meaning of life and resiliency. The aim of the study is thus to identify a connection between the meaning of life, together with its determinants, and resiliency. The second aim is to replicate the previous study carried out in order to verify the libertial-value-grounded theory of the meaning of life (Ostrowski, 2008).

The theory in question propounds that the meaning of life develops gradually as a result of the interaction between dispositions arranged in a hierarchy. The preliminary disposition is subjective freedom, or the sense of independence, which determines the scope of values that the individual is able to acknowledge and adhere to. A higher sense of freedom in the ego experience of the individual (free ego) leads to a better ability to acknowledge others and their values and to act in the surrounding world. The sense of enslavement in turn has a negative effect on sensitivity to values. And it is precisely this type of sensitivity which comes into play as a second disposition in the process through which the meaning of life develops. The libertial-value-grounded theory propounds that subjective freedom and sensitivity to values are two hierarchically arranged dispositions which lie at the core of the meaning of life. Hence the name of the theory: a neologism which tries to convey the mechanism that allows for the meaning of life to emerge. The adjective “libertial” refers to the sense of subjective freedom while “value-grounded” to sensitivity to values. A hypothesis was offered that a higher sense of freedom in the individual and his or her sensitivity to creative, experiential and attitudinal values, as defined by Frankl (2010, 2014), have a positive effect on the meaning of life.

The first hypothesis covers the field of general psychological theory, i.e. the motivation theory. As was mentioned before, the study presented in this chapter applies the general theory to identify the determinants of resiliency. For this reason, a second hypothesis was offered whereby a higher sense of the meaning of life and its determinants, such as subjective freedom and sensitivity to values, translates into higher resiliency levels.

Method

The study was carried out in between 2012 and 2013 on the group of 115 people, 22 of whom were excluded from the study due to their sten scores on the

Self-Criticism Scale, which were either too high (9 or 10) or too low (1 or 2).¹ The scale was used for control purposes to examine the veracity of the answers provided on the *Tennessee Self Concept Scale* by Fitts (1964). Since all the methods used in the study were self-assessment methods, it was decided that the respondents had to be selected according to their scores on the control scale.

As a result, 93 scores, including 42 women and 51 men, were accepted for analysis. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 79 years ($M = 46.83$; $SD = 14.01$). The respondents had vocational (17.2%), secondary (51.61%) and tertiary (31.18%) education.

The meaning of life was surveyed with the *Ostrowski Attitude to Life Questionnaire* (2008), which is composed of 20 items. The accuracy of the method was estimated with an alpha coefficient of 0.85. Its diagnostic relevance was evaluated by correlating the obtained results with the results produced by the *Purpose of Life Test* (Crumbaugh, Maholick, 1969; Pilecka, 1986; Popielski, 1987). A positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.59$; $p < 0.001$) was established between the results obtained with the ALQ and the PLT respectively.

Personal freedom was surveyed with the *Ostrowski Personal Freedom Questionnaire* (2008), which is composed of 40 items and whose accuracy is estimated with an alpha coefficient of 0.83. The method utilised three positive scales, such as *Social Independence* ($\alpha = 0.62$), *Sense of Freedom* ($\alpha = 0.63$), *Internal Locus of Control*, which was in line with Rotter's theory ($\alpha = 0.69$), and one negative scale: *Sense of Being Lost in Freedom Without Guidance* ($\alpha = 0.67$), the items of which were calculated the other way round, i.e. as "backwards" items, to retain the additive qualities of the entire questionnaire.

Sensitivity to values was examined with the *Ostrowski Sensitivity to Values Questionnaire*, ($\alpha = 0.91$), which draws upon the classification adopted by Frankl and encompasses 40 values arranged in three scales: *Attitudinal Values* ($\alpha = 0.74$), *Creative Values* ($\alpha = 0.90$) and *Experiential Values* ($\alpha = 0.84$). The respondents were requested to identify each and every value which proved important to their lives ("What matters to me"). Then they were asked to identify values that "brought a positive change to their lives," i.e. they were asked to identify "attitudinal values." If the respondents identified a negative category as the one that brought a positive change to their lives, it was qualified as an attitudinal value. If, for example, the respondents chose illness as an experience that nonetheless brought a positive change to their lives, they expressed an attitudinal value which, according to Frankl, went beyond suffering caused by the illness (Ostrowski, 2008).

Resiliency was measured by the SPP-25 (*Resiliency Measurement Scale*, Ogińska-Bulik, Juczyński, 2008). The authors, who adhere to the understanding of resiliency as a disposition, identify the following factors: 1) *Persistence and Determination*, 2) *Openness to New Experiences and a Sense of Humour*, 3) *Personal Coping Skills and Tolerance of Negative Affect*, 4) *Tolerance of Failure*

¹ Polish norms (Ostrowski, unpublished).

and Treating Life as a Challenge, 5) *Optimistic Attitude to Life and the Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations*. It should be added that the last factor primarily focuses on the ability to get a grip in difficult situations, and only one statement was related to optimism. While the total of factors explained the variance by 51%, persistence and determination were key in the calculation and explained the variance by 29.1%. With the Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.89 for the entire scale, the measurement was considered reliable. The accuracy rates for the five sub-scales ranged from 0.67–0.75. The results were marked by high stability (0.85), which was measured with the test-retest method at four-week intervals between the first and the second measurement (Ogińska-Bulik, Juczyński, 2008).

Findings

The age of the respondents, despite its vast range, demonstrates no significant correlation with the results of the study, and the same rule applies to education, whereas gender is statistically significant, which is represented in Table 1. Men are more sensitive to creative and experiential values while women have a higher meaning of life. Resiliency components show variation only on the *Tolerance of Failure and Treating Life as a Challenge* scale, in which women scored better than men (Table 2).

Table 1. Gender and existential variables (n = 93)

Variable	Women		Men		Variation	
	M	SD	M	SD	t (91)	p
Attitudinal Values	0.64	1.14	0.37	0.95	0.81	ni
Creative Values	6.67	2.94	8.02	3.16	−2.12	0.0368
Experiential Values	10.74	4.53	12.78	3.79	−2.37	0.0198
Social independence	25.63	3.31	25.29	3.02	0.52	ni
Sense of Freedom	26.46	3.23	26.40	3.21	0.09	ni
Internal Locus of Control	26.24	4.49	27.48	4.33	−1.35	ni
Not Being Lost in Freedom without Guidance	27.86	5.47	29.33	4.067	−1.49	ni
Meaning of Life	60.33	8.47	56.49	8.02	2.24	0.0273

Source: Authors’ research.

Table 2. Gender and resiliency (n = 93)

Variable	Women		Men		Variation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (91)	<i>p</i>
<i>Persistence</i>	13.54	3.18	12.54	3.953	1.32	ni
<i>Openness</i>	14.22	2.78	13.04	3.49	1.77	ni
<i>Coping Skills</i>	12.19	3.57	10.94	3.93	1.56	ni
<i>Tolerance</i>	13.74	3.12	12.04	3.86	2.30	0.0236
<i>Focus</i>	12.39	3.58	11.27	3.67	1.47	ni

Source: Authors’ research.

Path analysis (SPSS, Amos) was used in order to create a model necessary to run the empirical verification of the libertial-value-grounded theory of the meaning of life (Figure 1). The theory in question propounds that the determinants of the meaning of life may be arranged in two levels. The first level covers the felt subjective freedom (free ego), which is in direct proportion to social independence, desire for free action (subjective freedom) and internal locus of control, and in inverse proportion to being lost in freedom without guidance. Out of the four components, social independence and internal locus of control have an indirect effect while subjective freedom and the sense of not being lost in freedom without guidance have a direct effect on the meaning of life.

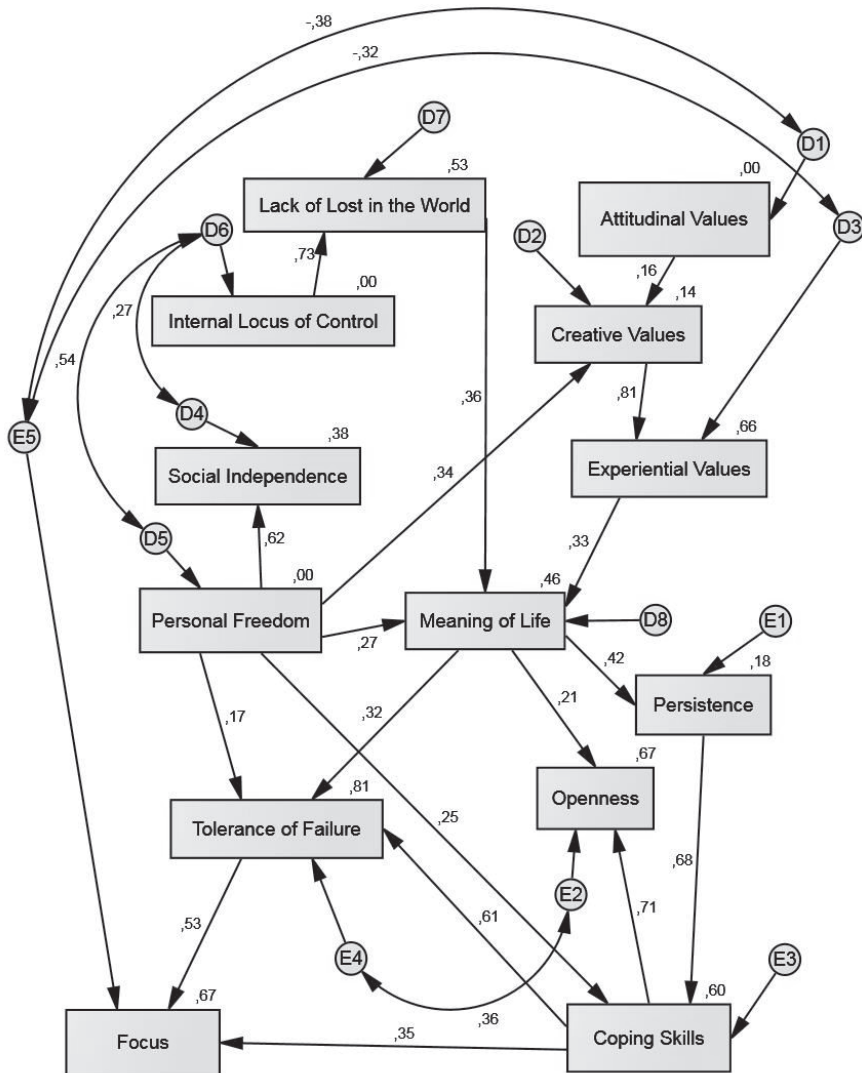
The relationships between the intrinsic variance of each personal freedom component are also important (Figure 1), i.e. between internal locus of control and desire for free action (personal freedom), and between internal locus of control and social independence. Interestingly enough, the sense of not being lost in freedom without guidance is not correlated with three other variables.

The theory propounds that the higher the subjective personal levels are, the better conditions this creates for the second level to perform, i.e. the ability to acknowledge and adhere to values. Sensitivity to values can develop in three different directions, i.e. towards creative values, experiential values and attitudinal values. While all three types of values play a role in the process through which the meaning of life develops, it is only sensitivity to experiential values that has a direct effect on it.

The chart in Figure 1, which represents these correlations, satisfactorily fits the data, which means that it is possible to create an empirical model reflecting the correlations suggested by the theory. The path which best represents the theoretical sequential arrangement of the determinants of the meaning of life was demonstrated with a line in bold.

An additional explanation must be made, since it is only partially justified to interpret the path model in causal terms. The fact that the model which satisfactorily fits the data is possible may serve as a condition which is necessary and yet insufficient to demonstrate the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable, i.e. the meaning of life.

Figure 2. The model of the relationship between resiliency and the meaning of life and its determinants: subjective personal freedom and sensitivity to values ($n = 93$). Fit of model is satisfactory: *chi-squared*(54) = 48.62; $p = 0.71$; RMR = 1.63; GFI = 0.86; AGFI = 0.76; RMSEA < 0.01. The resiliency component variance was explained by Persistence (18%), Coping Skills (60%), Openness (67%), Focus (67%) and Tolerance of Failure (81%)



Source: Authors' research.

Persistence and Determination, Openness to New Experiences and a Sense of Humour and Tolerance of Failure and Treating Life as a Challenge, were directly explained by the meaning of life. It should be added that *Openness* and *Tolerance*

demonstrate a statistically significant correlation. Two resiliency components, namely *Personal Coping Skills and Tolerance of Negative Affect* and *Tolerance of Failure and Treating Life as a Challenge* were explained by *Personal Freedom. Optimistic Attitude to Life and the Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations* is the only resiliency component not to be defined by any of the existential variables examined in the study, but its intrinsic variance nonetheless demonstrates a negative correlation with sensitivity to attitudinal values and sensitivity to experiential values.

Each resiliency component correlates with one another. The intrinsic variance correlation of openness and tolerance of failure was already mentioned. Persistence fosters coping skills while tolerance of failure strengthens the ability to focus in difficult situations. Coping skills show the broadest impact as a resiliency component, as they strengthen openness, tolerance of failure and the ability to focus in difficult situations.

The gender variable, which proves significant in one-way analysis (Tables 1 and 2), demonstrates no significance in structural models (Figure 1 and 2).

Discussion

The current replication gave better results than the previous study (Ostrowski, 2008) in that it produced an empirical model which is more in line with the theory. The results obtained in 2008 demonstrated that the meaning of life is conditioned by subjective freedom and sensitivity to values, but the sequential arrangement of the predictors in the path model based on the study carried out on healthy individuals ran counter to the sequence suggested by the theory (Ostrowski, 2008, p. 94), and the study carried out on individuals after heart failure demonstrated the two predictors as parallel (Ostrowski, 2008, p. 136). The current study allows for creating a structural model which is a little more in line with the theory (Figure 1), which in turn arranges both dispositions in a sequence whereby personal subjective freedom prevails over sensitivity to values. Only several components in both predictors form a sequence which adheres to the theory. The path which best represents the theory runs from *Subjective Freedom* through *Creative Values* and *Experiential Values to the Meaning of Life* (a line in bold in Figure 1).

The meaning of life is directly conditioned by: personal subjective freedom and the sense of not being lost in freedom without guidance. The other two aspects of personal freedom, that is, internal locus of control and social independence, are revealed as the indirect determinants of the meaning of life which are mediated by two independent variables. Contrary to the theory, the experience of attitudinal values fails to directly condition the meaning of life, as it does so only through other values.

It is worth noting that the independent variables furnished by the theory, namely subjective freedom and sensitivity to values, explain the meaning of life variance by 46%. Other determinants are yet to be explored.

Hypothesis 2, which concerns the determinants of resiliency, was also confirmed. The study revealed that the meaning of life is the most significant and that it directly conditions the *Persistence and Determination* variable, which in turn is the most significant of all the resiliency components considered in the study. A higher meaning of life fosters individual resiliency levels, together with *Openness and Tolerance of Failure*, and this indirectly strengthens the *Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations* as well as *Coping Skills and Tolerance of Negative Affect*. Overall, each aspect of resiliency grows as the meaning of life develops. As for other variables, *Subjective Freedom* also has a positive effect on resiliency.

The charts representing structural models (Figure 1 and 2) are particularly interesting for their latent variables, which were marked in a circle. The variables marked with letter D (as for Delta) represent the intrinsic variances of independent variables while the variables marked with letter E (as for Epsilon) represent the intrinsic variances of dependent variables. The two-tailed paths with arrows mark the correlations between intrinsic variances.

The chart representing the determinants of resiliency (Figure 2) reveals a negative correlation between the intrinsic variance of the *Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations* and the intrinsic variance of *Sensitivity to Attitudinal and Experiential Values*. The correlation demonstrates that experiential and attitudinal values become less important for each individual as he or she tries to focus in a difficult situation. Strikingly enough, no correlation between creative values was revealed, which are nonetheless more pronounced than experiential values in their effect on the ability to focus in difficult situations.

As was mentioned before in the methodology section, one out of five items in the *Optimistic Attitude to Life and the Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations* scale from the *SPP-25 Questionnaire* concerns optimism, and the latter fosters sensitivity to values rather than to the contrary. The fact that it negatively correlates with sensitivity to values may be explained by examining various types of optimism. Czapinski (1985, 2004) identifies essential optimism, which is tantamount to the belief in the nature of the world; causative optimism, which enables individuals to feel they can achieve success; expansive optimism, which is tantamount to the belief in one's bright future; and defensive optimism, which expresses itself with the hope to avoid failure. Sensitivity to values appears to decrease as defensive optimism rises. Those individuals who are anxious about the future focus their attention on the stimuli they identify as dangerous.

The correlations between formal data such as gender and age and factual results are also one of the moot points of the analysis. In the study carried out in 2008, neither gender nor age made any effect on the results concerning the meaning of life and its determinants (Ostrowski, 2008). The current study demonstrates that men are more sensitive to creative and experiential values while women have a higher meaning of life. The results require further empirical verification.

The results concerning resiliency are different than those produced by Ogińska-Bulik and Juczyński (2008). The authors of the SPP-25 method demonstrated that men show higher general resiliency levels and score better than women in the following three components: *Personal Coping Skills and Tolerance of Negative Affect*, *Tolerance of Failure and Treating Life as a Challenge*, *Optimistic Attitude to Life and the Ability to Focus in Difficult Situations*. The study presented in this chapter reveals only one difference in women's favour, as they scored better in *Tolerance of Failure and Treating Life as a Challenge*. The two studies produced different results, which requires further verification.

By way of summary, it must be remarked that:

1. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed, which is in accordance with the libertial-value-grounded theory and demonstrates that the meaning of life is conditioned by the sense of personal freedom and individual sensitivity to values. The sequentiality of both dispositions was also demonstrated to some extent, which means that personal freedom is the first to affect the meaning of life, and sensitivity to values the second. The evidence which proves the sequential nature of the correlation is limited and requires further verification.
2. Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed, which demonstrates that resiliency is directly conditioned by the meaning of life and personal freedom as one of its variables, and indirectly conditioned through connecting paths by all the other existential predictors examined in the study.
3. The results of the study may serve as an encouragement to further explore the correlations between sensitivity to values and resiliency defined as optimism and the ability to focus in difficult situations.
4. The gender-related determinants of various resiliency aspects also require verification.

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